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Gray uses budget as a steppingstone to Hill prominence

By Ralph Z. Hallow
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At 44, William H. Gray III, appears to be on a fast track in national politics.

He started the year as the new House Budget Committee chairman with a bang, immediately winning praise from business leaders and politicians for his tough-mindedness on spending and taxation.

By May, when his committee completed the first draft of its budget plan, Republican and Democratic members alike rose to applaud him.

When he took the immensely complicated federal budget to conference with the GOP-dominated Senate, he again scored big, getting compliments from his party's leaders on his performance — and visits by White House aides.

Not bad for a fourth-term Philadelphia Democrat who hails from a

district that is 80 percent black and who was once stereotyped as a big-spending urban liberal.

Earlier this year, with his star rising so fast, there was some speculation that he would challenge Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., in 1986.

But that possibility has apparently been pre-empted by a more senior Democrat from Pennsylvania, sixth-term congressman Robert W. Edgar.

Asked about taking Mr. Specter on, Mr. Gray said, "No. Edgar is going to run."

So it's not the Senate for Bill Gray, at least not next year. But what about his party's presidential nomination sometime down the road?

"Who knows what's coming?" he says. "I'm just trying to get through the first two years as budget chairman. Then, maybe a second two

years. That will take me to January '89."

He pauses, then adds, "There is a problem of what you do after four years of being budget chairman and of doing it in your fifth term in Congress."

To have a credible shot at winning the presidency, would a black have to be a conservative in order to allay the electorate's concerns regarding fiscal profligacy?

"I'd probably say not a conservative, but he would have to be perceived as someone who is moderate, who doesn't fit the traditional mode — that he's not going to be out talking every minute just about civil rights," Mr. Gray says.

"He's got to say, 'Hey, my focus isn't just on black issues but on American issues,'" he adds.

The federal budget is an "American" issue. Mr. Gray's work on it won admiration from both parties.

One admirer on Mr. Gray's committee is Jack Kemp, the conservative Republican from New York who is seeking the GOP presidential nomination in 1988. And Mr. Gray just as often returns the admiration.

"Bill dominated much of the debate on the committee. He was pragmatic, without losing his liberal credentials," says Mr. Kemp, adding "I wouldn't be surprised to see him on the national ticket for the Democratic Party some day."

Several months ago, before an audience of Mr. Kemp's financial backers, Mr. Kemp introduced Mr. Gray as "one of the warmest and finest human beings in this town."

Can Mr. Kemp win the GOP presidential nomination in 1988?

"I think he can," Mr. Gray says. "Right now, if I had to project in '88 what the Republicans are going to do and what the Democrats are going to do, they're going to fight with each other. They're going to fracture all over the place."

Of the top contenders on the GOP side — Vice President George Bush, Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas, former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee, and Mr. Kemp — Mr. Gray says, "I think probably the guy who is the long-distance runner is Kemp."

Why?

Because, says Mr. Gray, "Jack has a broader base than any of the current favorites, and he has purposely broadened it by doing some issues that conservatives normally don't touch."

Mr. Gray says Mr. Kemp "is fighting right now with the White House on South Africa. He basically believes the Republican Party can-

not afford the label of racism."

Mr. Gray notes that Mr. Kemp led the fight in the House on behalf of the Martin Luther King holiday bill and last year voted for Mr. Gray's anti-apartheid amendment.

"Jack thinks one of the problems is that conservatism has been identified with racism. He's against that. And so are the new young guys like Vin Weber and Newt Gingrich," he says.

Rep. Weber of Minnesota and Rep. Gingrich of Georgia are leading members of a group of "young Turk" Republicans in the House who call themselves the Conservative Opportunity Society.

"They believe true conservatism does not mean you're anti-semitic or racist. That's why you got the response out of Newt and Vin when Falwell came back from South Africa and did that dumb stuff he did," Mr. Gray says.

"They went, 'Oh, my God,' because they're trying to get a political realignment."

Last month, Jerry Falwell, the Baptist fundamentalist minister

called Desmond Tutu, the South African Anglican bishop, a "phony" for claiming to speak for that country's blacks. Mr. Falwell later apologized.

"Right now, there's a battle in the Republican Party," he says. "There's Jack, Newt Gingrich and Vin Weber who say, 'Hey, we can be economic conservatives without being racial conservatives'."

The young Turk Republicans who are trying to turn the GOP into a majority party in the nation know "you can't get yuppies, young urban professionals, to be fiscally conservative if you are perceived to be racist or anti-semitic," Mr. Gray says.